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Radios failed during Navy Yard attack, emergency responders say

By Kevin Bo 09/19/13 05:38

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Radios for federal firefighters and police officers failed during Monday's mass shooting at Washington's Navy Yard, according to union representatives for first responders.

Union officials said police and firefighters resorted to using their cellphones and radios from D.C.'s emergency responders to communicate with each other during the attack.

Anthony Meely, chairman of the Fraternal Order of Police Naval District Washington (NDW) Labor Committee, said police officers who were first on the scene at the Navy Yard had trouble communicating with others in the force via their radios.

Initially, officers found that their radios were working. But as they ventured deeper into the building where the shooting took place, their equipment stopped functioning.

After the first shootout with the gunman, one officer

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found his radio's battery was dead, while another officer could not receive a signal from his radio and was unable to call for help. That forced them to use an officer's cellphone to call others outside the building, according to Meely.

"They had to use their cellphone to just call out and tell them what's going on,"

Meely said.

Meely, who was on the scene at Navy Yard and took part in the search for a potential second shooter, said problems with their radios have been "a known issue" on the base with radio batteries not being able to hold charge and being unable to receive signals inside buildings.

The union representative said he thought it was "sad" that police officers had to use a cellphone to call for help.

"I think it's disgusting, unnecessary and sad, but what could they do if the radios weren't working? But that was the only way for them to call and get them some help," Meely said.

Firefighters were also having problems with their radio signals at the Navy Yard, according to one union official.

Greg Russell, president of the National Capital Federal Firefighters, said his firefighters were on location setting up an incident command post a few doors down from where the shooting took place.

The incident commander from Naval District Washington was not able to communicate from his position inside the building to fire units outside of the building. He was not able to communicate with his subordinate units outside of the building," Russell said.

He had to rely upon the radios that belong to the D.C. Fire Department. He could not deal directly with his own unit on Navy radios," he said.

A NDW spokesman said the base is undergoing a review of its physical security.

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"At this time the NDW focus remains on healing as a Navy family and transitioning to normal operations at the Washington Navy Yard. The Secretary of the Navy has ordered a review of physical security and we will support it fully. Our biggest concern is our Navy family," said Ed Zeigler, NDW's director of public affairs.

Public safety officers on military bases and other federal facilities have long complained about their radios, saying they cannot use them to communicate to each other during emergencies.

Russell, who came down from Annapolis, Md., in response to the shooting, said he went to nearby Bolling Air Force Base and helped debrief fire fighters when they returned from the scene.

He said the federal firefighters' incident commander's radio was not powerful enough to hit a transmission tower outside the building. "D.C. Fire, their radios worked appropriately and efficiently from the same building," he said.

Russell is calling for NDW officials responsible for the radio system to resign.

Radio communications has been a persistent problem for public safety officials, hampering the responses to the 9/11 terrorist attacks as well as Hurricane Katrina.

Emergency responders lobbied Congress successfully to authorize a \$7 billion nationwide wireless network — which is not yet in operation— that could help improve radio communications during disasters.

"The FCC will continue to monitor, evaluate and respond as needed to help ensure our nation's communications infrastructure works when people need it most. These are the times when Americans must be able to communicate with family, friends and emergency personnel," said acting Federal Communications Commission Chairwoman Mignon Clyburn in a speech on Tuesday.

Security at the Navy Yard has come into question following revelations that the identified shooter, former Navy reservist Aaron Alexis, kept his security clearance despite mental health problems and gun-related arrests.

The Pentagon has ordered military-wide reviews of base security and background checks in the wake of the shooting. In addition, several lawmakers on Capitol Hill already plan to hold hearings regarding the security clearance process that helped Alexis enter the base.



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